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ABSTRACT

One of five papers discussing the humanistic model used in the training of reading teachers at City College of New York, this paper deals with procedures used to sensitize students to their own behavior as they work with urban children. The procedures described involve role play and simulations that allow potential teachers to identify their biases and subjective feelings and to find ways of going beyond these to establish satisfactory relationships with students. The paper contains samples of student/teacher dialogues and offers suggestions for follow-up activities and further development of this type of teacher training. (FL)

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Generating the Humanistic Model Pupil-Teacher Interaction

April 29, 1981

Prof. B. Watkins-Mincy

My function this morning is to talk about the humanistic process of teaching reading in terms of the interaction between the pupils and the teacher. We have discussed humanistic in many ways. My colleagues and I consider it a method for helping individuals learn to cope with others, himself and his environment in ways which are self-satisfying. In this way, we are dealing with the students' self-concept while fostering a good environment with-in which to learn. The words sound good and teachers will often agree that these issues are important; however, problems arise when the implementation of same is necessary. No, we can not cure societies' ills, but we need not go to the other extreme. We do not have to love all of our children but we can not ignore the environment which each child brings to school. Either point on the continuum could interfere with our prime objective which is to be facilitators of learning. We are to teach reading. However, our times are showing us that we also have to teach children not only to read and understand the words but how to judge, reason, and evaluate their own reactions to these words, consider the feelings of others such as characters in the story as well as their own.

Beautiful, you might be saying, but what about the reality of it all? How can we do this given our constraints? We have found that reading teachers want to offer the best instruction for youngsters but that they need an opportunity to evaluate themselves as well as the children and then look at how they interact with children in order to provide an optimal setting for learning. We are certainly not suggesting that one be a bleeding heart about this but that we take time in our educational programs to help reading teachers translate these concepts into teaching skills and methodology.

Therefore, I will give the background information concerning the procedure which was used in one of our courses, how it served the growth of the students, as well as how it can be used to benefit both the teacher and the learner.

In a graduate course at City College, which dealt with teacher-pupil interaction, a learning experience was developed which would provide a sound opportunity for reading teachers to evaluate their abilities both in terms of teaching content and teaching styles. In this course the teachers had readings to do and there was a lecture component. However, they were also asked to prepare reading lessons for a class which had certain needs which were written by the teachers and put into simulations by me. The teachers presented the lesson to the other graduate students who played the role of children. The special feature here was that each presentation was videotaped and then viewed by the class for evaluation.

I used this format because one of the more crucial areas in any educational program is in helping students develop, extend and, in some cases, alter certain inappropriate educational, behavioral, psychological, and emotional perspectives which they might have in terms of the children they teach. This type of issue around the personal points of view of teachers which can interfere with the successful implementation of the humanistic process of teaching reading is a delicate one and often does not respond to didactic teaching which is the primary mode of transferring information among graduate students. Such an issue was one of several which underscored the view I maintained throughout the course. This view was primarily that there wasn't any one way of teaching reading nor was there necessarily one method by which all children in a class would learn how to read. This concept helped students trust the process which allowed for variability in teaching methodology, exploration of new ideas, rethinking of present ones and not accepting quick easy answers. There was room for risk taking as well as a respect for everyone's efforts. Moreover, the videotape provided an unbiased account of the performance of teachers and students playing the role of children.

Since I am talking about an urban reading program as well as a humanistic one, I feel it is necessary to include that there were another factors which had to be addressed and they were the racial and cultural diversity as well as the language differences one could find in urban schools especially in N.Y.C. As the teachers discussed their classroom compositions, the most interesting outcome which I found was that the teachers and children could be from the same racial background, with similar cultural experiences, possibly speaking the same language but there was still the differences in age, perspectives, sometimes economic levels and certainly roles. These differences also had to be addressed and evaluated in terms of teachers' attitudes, values and judgements as well as those of the children.

I also wanted to give the students an opportunity to practice various techniques for teaching, become aware of how they could learn to enhance their performance and those of the children and they were encouraged to deal with individual differences, and respond to the needs of the children without losing perspective of their goals as future reading teachers. Our focus was primarily upon the ways in which teachers and pupils interrelated in the reading process.

Simulations were chosen from anecdotes which teachers wrote concerning their own teaching experiences. The students did not know of each others written account and the teacher who presented his/her lesson did not know which simulation of class behavior had been given to the group who played the role of children. Therefore, four components were operative, Self Selection, Double Blind Setting, Spontaneity and Evaluation.

Self selection of materials was operative because the simulations were draw from the teachers' background experience. A Double Blind setting was created in that the teachers nor those who acted as children could predetermine the action and in that way they had a better chance of responding naturally and not give, as you can imagine what we call in New York, "the well rehearsed Broadway production".

There was adequate spontaneity because although the teachers were given some idea of the type of class to prepare for such as a 5th grade class of average readers with some behavior problems, they were not given what types of problems they would encounter. I must add here that the teachers said that they were nervous at the beginning but once the simulation began they relaxed and got into the role playing.

The fourth aspect, Evaluation, occurred when presentations were viewed on videotape in terms of the teacher-pupil interaction as well as the content of the lesson, the teaching style, and the materials.

An example of some of the simulations which were used are as follows:

a) A teacher would present a story to a group of poor 4th graders but the readers would have difficulty relating to it because the content was unfamiliar to them and they would be just reading the words.

b) Children were to do a reading assignment but they could not follow the directions. They were to ask a lot of questions but keep getting the answers wrong. A child was bilingual, could speak English but had trouble with some of the vocabulary related to the activity.

The results were most rewarding according to the masters level students' report. They pointed out how helpful this would be if they could actually work with children and observe the children's behavior as well as their own because they saw how the quiet child was overlooked or how they directed their responses generally to the problem children or the ones who always knew the answers. They found out how frustrated they could become because of certain assumptions they made. They recognized how personally they took a child's lack of understanding a concept and responded to it as if this was a personal insult. The consensus was that such a focus could interfere with a reading teacher's objectivity and keep him/her from looking at what the child was struggling with or how he/she

could clarify the issue for the child. Over the semester, when teachers found themselves in situations in class and in their own teaching careers where children did not understand, they felt less intimidated and began thinking about their own attitudes, values and judgments. They reported and it was observed on videotape that they tried to determine the better course of action.

However, the need to do this on video presented much pressure for the teachers because they had to respond relatively quickly. This also produced a preponderance of "true" performances. "True" in that the teachers could not fake a situation for long. Therefore, sometimes curt responses or inappropriate affect was shown when the child's or children's distracting behavior persisted. I must add that the students were skillful in the roles of children and really gave each other valid situations to consider.

I will now give some examples of the interactions which were simulated. One example of a poor teaching experience was given by a teacher who had prepared to teach vocabulary to a group of youngsters. At one point, when she had presented a particular word and given an explanation of the word with examples and pictures, a child did not understand it. In fact, this student acting as a child continued to ask variations of the same question. The teacher put her hand on her hip and said: "Oh, come now, James, don't you know that we have been going over this for some time?" During the critical analysis of the videotape it was apparent that this was not the tone or attitude she should have taken. She did not rephrase her remarks or try to get at the child's confusion. The teacher reported that she had thought that the child was just being lazy and withholding and felt exasperated, but she did not realize how it had sounded. The student who role played the child said that he had felt intimidated and between the two of them a poor atmosphere was set up.

Another example shows how a teacher had a fair response. During a reading lesson for early grades, a child entered the room and announced that her grandmother had been missing. The teacher was visibly responsive and suggested in a gentle way that they would talk about it later. This caused a distraction and the group stopped role playing. When we discussed it, they said that they would have wanted to discuss this and the teacher said she would have wanted to also but she thought she should persist with the lesson. We concluded that such a distraction could take precedence and the youngsters could be given time to talk about this if the child was comfortable with it and they might provide some support to the distressed child. Here, too, as reading teachers we could discuss words, concepts, feelings around people leaving us unexpectedly. Maybe present a story where a child loses something or is lost. Therefore, I am not advocating that we not teach reading but that we use real situations when they present themselves.

A successful account comes from a teacher who was reinforcing reading skills already taught with an open-ended game board. The children had been prepared but were instructed to be unruly. The teacher just closed the board and talked about how they were to interact with each other and with her. She asked what the problem was, gave them time to respond and told how she might find it hard to be patient through this herself when she was eager to play a game but that they would be playing as soon as they understood the directions. She even had then given various words to describe the different types of behaviour they were discussing. In this way, she was extending vocabulary and not just leaving them with a reprimand. When we evaluated the tape, the student who role played children said that they had felt OK, especially when the teacher gave them time to explain their feelings and showed that she understood their excitement.

We are to teach reading, that's our function. It does seem sometimes that children try to keep us from doing this. However, it is helpful to try and understand why there is a gap here. Are they dealing with disturbances from their environment, is our preparation adequate, are we listening to what they are saying, are we checking to see if the reading material is on their level and of interest to them? Are we trying to find out what they are thinking and how we are relating with them and them with us? In order to relate with children one must have patience and skill as well as respect for the children and their needs.

In closing, I would like to paraphrase Jacob Bronowski: "Knowledge is not a looseleaf notebook of facts. Above all it is a responsibility for the integrity of what we are, primarily of what we are as ethical creatures." The personal commitment of a reading teacher to his or her skill, the intellectual strivings and the emotional equipment working together as one, can make a humanistic process of teaching reading possible.